

International

A section of military backing coup, says Fijian President

SUVA, May 21: Members of a special forces unit of the Fijian military are backing an attempted coup which has seen Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and some 30 others taken hostage, the president said today, reports AFP.

President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara said in a nationwide television address that members of a special "counter revolutionary warfare unit" were involved in the bid to seize power.

He said Fiji needed no outside help to "terminate what's happening."

"I do not want to see any overseas intervention physically. We have the personnel to terminate what's happening," he said.

Coup leader George Speight told a local radio station that shots had been fired at the par-

liamentary building where the hostages were being held, but he said they came from a "third force" on the perimeter of the complex. He did not elaborate.

Meanwhile, Fijian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry has refused to yield to Speight and his gunmen in the besieged parliament after some of his cabinet colleagues were forced to resign at gunpoint.

Some 10 MPs and about 20 parliamentary staff were released early this morning and government negotiators were seen leaving the legislative complex.

But after three days the armed gang's attempted coup had turned into a tense stalemate with the security forces holding fast in their loyalty to the elected government.

Police and troops had set up

road blocks around the parliamentary complex which the gunmen, led by a local businessman, stormed on Friday in a bid to overthrow Chaudhry's year-old administration.

Some of the 10 MPs who were released from captivity said the gunmen had demanded resignations in exchange for their freedom.

AP adds: The relationship between the rebels and President Mara deteriorated today after Mara rejected Speight's request for direct talks.

"I will not have any dialogue with those who are imprisoning the parliamentarians and bear arms in the parliament complex unless they are freed," Mara said in a news conference broadcast on national television.

"I learned from him after-

wards...that what he was going to tell me was that if I don't follow what he says, he will start executing hostages one by one."

At a news conference in parliament Speight denied such a plan.

"To suggest that we would embark on such an action as a resolution is just irresponsible and crazy," he said. "I am giving the world my word...I am guaranteeing their safety."

Mara said Speight was demanding the president step down and allow his group to run the country.

"That I will not be able to oblige," Mara said defiantly.

Speight claims he annulled Fiji's constitution and Mara's presidency when his group raided parliament last Friday, and that he now rules Fiji by decree.



An Ethiopian soldier poses in front of a captured Eritrean tank that they captured in the west war front with Eritrea. The Ethiopian government says they have captured hundreds of tanks and much other equipment that they are using in the war against Eritrea.

—AFP photo

This file photo dated March 20, 2000 shows Nepalese mountain guide Babu Chheri, 36, holding flowers before setting out to climb Mount Everest without oxygen for the ninth time. Chheri set a world record for climbing world tallest (8,848 meters or 29,028 feet) peak in 15 hours 56 minutes on his tenth climb with no oxygen yesterday.

— AFP photo

Dalai Lama offers to mediate in Sri Lanka conflict

COLOMBO, May 21: The Dalai Lama is willing to broker peace in Sri Lanka where the ethnic war has escalated in recent weeks, a newspaper said Sunday, reports AFP.

The Sunday Leader quoted the Tibetan spiritual leader as saying in Berlin that he was ready to lead negotiations to find a political solution to the Tamil homeland issue.

"I always dream of visiting Sri Lanka... what is important in the present context is to bring peace," the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner said.

Evangelist offers to end Philippine hostage crisis

MANILA, May 21: A Filipino television evangelist has offered to lead a six-member team of "prayer warriors" to liberate 21 mostly foreign hostages held by Muslim extremist gunmen, the Philippine Inquirer newspaper reported today, says AFP.

Wilde Almeda of the Jesus Miracle Crusade asked the government to provide him with "lots of handcuffs" and a helicopter to take his team to the Abu Sayyaf mountain hideout in the island of Jolo, where he plans to subdue the kidnappers through prayers. He said the proposed mission would be in line with the teachings of the Bible, which states that the people of God are anointed to "set the captives free," the Inquirer quoted him as saying.

Uneasy calm in Ambon

JAKARTA, May 21: An uneasy calm descended on the riot-torn eastern Indonesian city of Ambon today, the day after renewed Muslim-Christian clashes broke out in a neighbouring area, reports AFP.

"It is calm today, we have not heard any shooting or explosion," a staff member at the Maranatha Christian coordinating post in Ambon said.

The member of staff, who declined to be named, said that the city appeared calm, but that only a few people had dared to attend mass.

"It is still very tense, although some street vendors are busy selling vegetables, fish and other foodstuff downtown," he said, adding that most residential areas in town remained heavily barricaded.

Celebrations end in tragedy as 30 drown in Turkey

ISTANBUL, May 21: At least 30 people, mainly women and children, died when two boats carrying guests at a baptism celebrations capsized off Trabzon on Turkey's Black Sea coast, the news agency Anatolia reported today, says AFP.

At least 14 more people are still missing, Anatolia said, giving the latest casualty figures after Saturday's accident.

According to Turkish officials, the boats were overloaded with up to 30 passengers each and tipped over after a moment of panic. Local fishermen worked all night to pull survivors and bodies from the sea.

Elian doing well, father tells Cuban radio

HAVANA, May 21: Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez is adapting well to his family and makeshift school during his stay in the United States, his father Juan Miguel Gonzalez told a Cuban radio station Saturday, reports AFP.

"The boy has actively participated in all the classes and he is coming along nicely," Gonzalez told Radio Bandera, based in Elian's home town Cardenas.

Elian, his father, stepmother and baby half-brother are staying outside the US capital Washington DC, while they await a ruling by an Atlanta, Georgia appeals court on whether the boy is entitled to an asylum hearing.



Miss Tiffany's 2000, Thailand's miss transvestite, 20-year old Chanya Moranon (C) receives her crown from last year's winner Pattreeya Siri-Ngamwong (L), late Saturday. Chanya won the crown and a cash prize of 60,000 baht (1,580 US) and will travel to the US to enter the worldwide contest of Miss Queen's of the Universe which was won last year by compatriot Pattreeya Siri-Ngamwong. The annual contest, organised since 1998, is also aimed at promoting the country's tourism and create a positive image of transvestite internationally as well as raising money for HIV-infected children. — AFP photo

'Upsurge of violence threatens ME peace'

JERUSALEM, May 21: Prime Minister Ehud Barak has warned several foreign leaders that the rash of violence in the Palestinian territories and in Lebanon could affect the peace process, his office said today, reports AFP.

Barak called Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah II and French President Jacques Chirac on Saturday "to explain that Israel views seriously the incidents in the territories and the escalation in the north," it said in a statement. "The prime minister informed them of the measures Israel has taken and warned them of the possible implications these events could have on the peace process," it added.

Over the past 10 days, five Palestinians have been killed and some 600 wounded in the most violent clashes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in years.

In Lebanon, Shiite Muslim Hezbollah guerrillas have stepped up their attacks on the Israeli army and its allied militia the South Lebanon Army since Israel began handing over military bases ahead of

a July deadline for the completion of its withdrawal from the region.

100 Palestinians hurt in 2nd 'day of rage' in WB, Gaza

Meanwhile, at least 100 Palestinians were hurt, mostly lightly, when Israeli troops fired on stone-throwing demonstrators in "day of rage" protests Saturday, the latest in more than a week of bloody unrest in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's spokesman Gadi Balthansky told AFP that the prime minister had decided to cancel his Monday trip to the United States because of the escalating violence in South Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

One Palestinian also died Saturday from his injuries after being shot in the head by a rubber bullet during similar angry protests Friday in support of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, hospital sources said.

Zimbabwe opposition hits out at McKinnon

HARARE, May 21: Margaret Dongo, leader of the opposition Zimbabwe Union of Democrats (ZUD), has accused Commonwealth chief Don McKinnon of endorsing a fraudulent election process by his claim last week that free and fair elections are possible in Zimbabwe, reports AFP.

"How can the person of the secretary general say such stupid things," Dongo said in an interview published Sunday in the independent Standard

newspaper. She said McKinnon's optimism was unfortunate given that he had not fully acquainted himself with the situation in the country.

The Commonwealth Secretary General said after meeting President Robert Mugabe in Harare last Tuesday that he believed free and fair elections are possible in Zimbabwe despite political violence which has claimed at least 25 lives, most of them opposition supporters.

Indonesian Gen apologises for last year's Aceh massacre

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, May 21: Three people were killed following the latest violence between Indonesian soldiers and alleged separatist rebels in the troubled province of Aceh, police and military sources said today, reports AFP.

The incidents came as the head of the Indonesian army's strategic reserve command Agus Wirahadikusumah apologised to the people of Aceh for last year's Bantaqiah massacre in which 58 people were killed.

A police officer was killed when armed men ambushed a police patrol just outside the town of Jantho in the Aceh Besar district on Saturday, Police Chief Lieutenant Colonel Syed Hussaini said.

A group of soldiers patrolling a village in West Aceh district was also attacked by armed men on Saturday, West Aceh military commander Lieutenant Colonel Widhagdo said.

US prepares to evacuate 300 people from Asmara

ASMARA, May 21: Some 300 US citizens were preparing to evacuate from Asmara today as fighting continued between Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, reports AFP.

Registration for the departure took place throughout Sunday morning.

US embassy sources said they expected about 300 people to be on the plane, which was scheduled to leave at midday local time.

Israelis barred from entering Palestinian territories

JERUSALEM, May 21: Israel has barred its citizens and foreigners from entering areas under full Palestinian control after a week of fierce fighting in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the army said today, reports AFP.

"This decision was taken following the increase in acts of violence in the territories," it said in a statement.

"The situation has reached a point where Washington feels it should take dependants out and advise US citizens to leave. We have a law that is very strict to provide protection," US Ambassador to Eritrea William Clarke told AFP during the morning registration.

The evacuees included US citizens, Eritrean dual nationals and citizens of other nations having evacuation agreements with the US.

Several British, Canadian and Israeli citizens were expected to be included on the flight.

During the morning, an embassy spokesman announced that the Eritrean government had just told him that holders of Eritrean passports would not be permitted to depart.

The spokesman said they still did not know if that meant all passport holders, or just people without exit visas from Eritrea.

It was also not clear if the order included dual nationals. "We are going to argue it if we need to," announced the spokesman.

Census in Kashmir runs into trouble

SRINAGAR, India, May 21: The first census in the restive Indian state of Kashmir for two decades ran into trouble today after Muslim separatist rebels warned state employees of dire consequences if work continued on the project, reports AFP.

The Kashmir government began work on the project, involving more than 22,000 officials, on May 16. The first stage is due for completion on June 5.

But the Al Fatah Force rebel group issued a stern warning to government employees and others involved in the new head

count. "We warn the employees and the officers not to take part in the so-called census as the Indian government is already implementing demographic changes like Israel did in occupied lands," a statement faxed to AFP said Sunday.

Spokesman Rashid Jamal said non-Kashmiri's were being included in the census in order to allow them "to further their ulterior motives."

"The actual population of Kashmir would not be counted by so-called authorities as thousands of Kashmiri's are

displaced, dislocated, (have) migrated, (are) jailed or been forcibly taken away by the army."

Jamal warned that "anybody found guilty of ignoring this call will be treated as a traitor."

The last census in the troubled state was conducted in 1981 but no further population counts have been held since the separatist insurgency began.

The Indian government ordered a fresh population count in 1991, but separatist militants issued a death threat, forcing state authorities to shelve the head count.

BRIEFLY

Leaders pay tributes to Rajiv:

President K R Narayanan, Vice-President Krishna Kant and Congress President Sonia Gandhi yesterday led the nation in paying fond tributes to late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on the occasion of his ninth death anniversary. PTI reports from New Delhi.

At a function organised at Vir Bhoomi in New Delhi, the President, Vice-President and Sonia Gandhi were joined by Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dixit and Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh besides senior Congress leaders including Manmohan Singh, Madhavrao Schindia and Sitaram Kesri.

Voting to begin in Haiti:

Haitians were to go to the polls Sunday in long-delayed local and legislative elections that many here hope will stem years of economic stagnation, rising crime and a flourishing international drug trade, AFP reports from Port-Au-Prince.

Italians vote in referendums:

Italians began voting in seven referendums Sunday, one of which was designed to put an end to chronic political instability, amid concerns that turnout could be too low to validate the ballot, AFP reports from Rome.

Voters were asked whether a provision that still distributes some 25 percent of parliament seats under proportional representation should be abolished.

Consensus breathes new life into NPT Japan welcomes accord

UNITED NATIONS, May 21: Representatives of 187 countries adopted a historic agreement Saturday that breathed new life into the 30-year-old nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and raised hopes for nuclear disarmament, reports AFP.

The consensus, the first achieved in three successive review conferences over 15 years, included an "unequivocal undertaking by nuclear-weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals."

The chief Mexican delegate, Antonio de la Cruz, told the closing session: "We leave this conference with greater faith in the prospects for nuclear disarmament."

Mexico is a member of the seven-nation New Agenda

Coalition, which wrested the undertaking from the five declared nuclear-weapon states on Thursday, one day before the four-week conference was due to close.

A spokesman for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, called the accord "a historic step forward in humanity's pursuit of a more peaceful world."

The agreement revitalised the conference at a moment when many delegates were expressing fears that it would fail and further weaken the NPT.

The treaty has been shaken by the 11 nuclear tests carried out by India and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, Japan welcomed a historic agreement on the 30-year-old Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) today, saying it was a major advance towards nuclear disarmament.

Lanka to try to block any UN resolution on war in Jaffna

COLOMBO, May 21: Sri Lanka has launched a diplomatic offensive aimed at preventing the country's escalating Tamil separatist conflict being discussed at the United Nations Security Council, officials here said today, reports AFP.

Colombo has already sounded out China and Russia to veto any attempt to bring a UN resolution on Sri Lanka in the Security Council, foreign ministry officials said.

The state-run Sunday Observer newspaper here said that Sri Lanka had been "tipped off" of an attempt by an unnamed European country to initiate a debate in the UN chamber on the Sri Lankan military crisis.

Sri Lanka's foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told reporters here Tuesday that the country was facing a "grave" military situation but the government was pouring in new

weapons in a bid to overcome the threat.

Separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas who are leading a campaign for independence in the island's northeast are currently battling government forces in the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

The Sunday Observer said that an attempt to move a resolution in the European Parliament calling for a UN resolution on Sri Lanka had been rebuffed.

Nearly two weeks ago, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged the warring parties in Sri Lanka to accept a Norwegian proposal for a political settlement to the separatist conflict.

In a statement through his spokesman, Annan said "thousands of civilians are in danger of being displaced" by a recent upsurge in fighting in Sri Lanka.

Annan "appeals to all parties to avoid placing the lives of civilians at risk, and to ensure humanitarian access to all in need," spokesman Fred Eckhardt said.

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen is due here Monday for talks with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga on the country's military crisis.

Johansen will be accompanied by Erik Solheim who has been appointed by Oslo as a special envoy to bring the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas to the negotiating table, the Norwegian embassy here said.

Diplomats said Solheim -- who visited neighbouring India last week to brief the New Delhi government on their efforts to broker peace between the warring parties in Sri Lanka -- will hold talks with several others in Colombo.

India rebuilds defences a year after Himalayan campaign

NEW DELHI, May 21: India's military establishment has raised a new corps to defend the frozen Himalayan heights of Kargil, launched an arms-buying spree and ordered a review of the nation's security system, reports Reuters.

Taken by surprise last year by the biggest peacetime influx of hundreds of armed intruders in disputed Kashmir, India's military planners want to lay to rest the ghosts of Kargil.

Nearly 500 soldiers died on the icy slopes in a ten-week offensive to repel the intruders.

Now, buoyed by a 28 per cent hike in defence spending plans for the fiscal year to March 2001, the military is refurbishing extensively.

"The re-arming of India has begun but it will take time," said G. Balachandran, an independent security affairs expert.

"Most of the big ticket pro-

jects are years old and even if the orders are passed now, it will take time before the forces get it," he said.

The intruders exploited gaps in India's defence and intelligence resources left by years of pressure on spending to seize a piece of land near the military ceasefire line that divides Kashmir with Pakistan, a government-appointed panel said.

Soldiers fought battles at dizzying heights of 17,000 ft, using heavy 30-year-old guns and in uniforms that hardly kept them warm.

"The cost of nearly 500 military personnel killed was bad enough. The trauma of being caught off-guard and surprised was equally shocking," said retired Lieutenant-General VR Raghavan.

This winter, troops were deployed across the snow-bound

heights of Kargil near the control line with new snow gear, guns and plenty of tinned food.

"Unlike last year, we had proper winter clothing, sleeping bags, and fibre reinforced plastic huts," said an army captain back from the frontline. "We were also acclimatised better."

Aerial surveillance vehicles, advanced listening devices and an artillery-locating radar are being acquired for frontline troops, Defence Minister George Fernandes told anxious members of parliament last week.

"The army has been deployed in direct eyeball to eyeball confrontation with adversary's troops. We have initiated several counter measures to thwart any attack," he told parliament.

The army, which has been given more than half the defence allocation of 585.87 billion rupees (\$ 13.62 billion) for

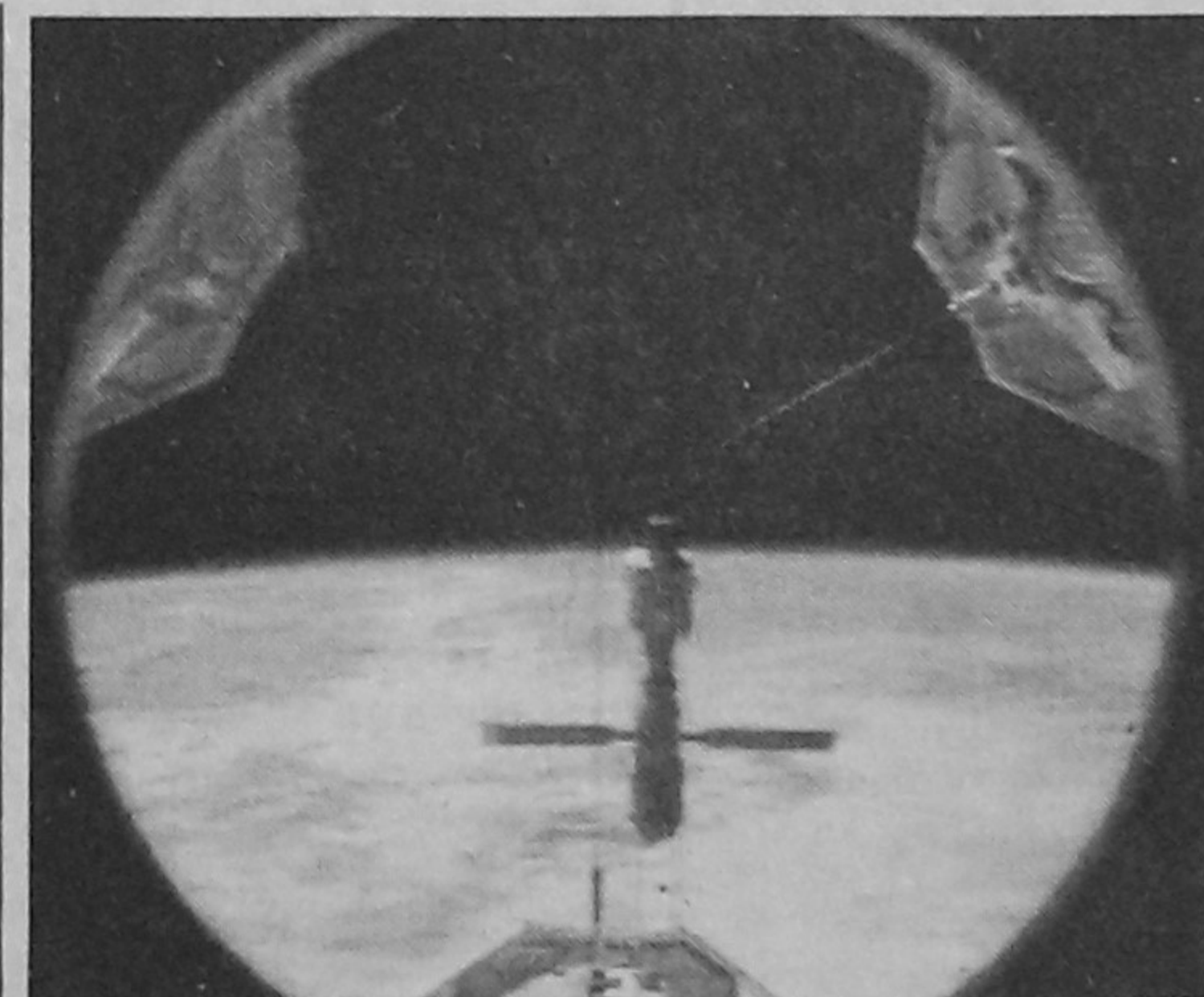
the 2000/2001 fiscal year, is in talks with Russian manufacturers to buy T-90 tanks, Fernandes said.

The Indian Air Force, which relentlessly pounded the Kargil intruders last summer, is looking to buy new fighter planes and a jet trainer aircraft it has sought for more than a decade.

British Aerospace and France's Dassault Aviation lead the race to supply the training aircraft, the deal for which could be worth as much as \$1.5 billion.

The new trainers are expected to reduce flying accidents in the air force, which lost 552 planes and 200 pilots in the 10 years to 1988/89.

Despite the increased money available and the step-up in defence purchases, some experts are sceptical whether the country's security has improved.



A view from the US Space Shuttle Atlantis shows the International Space Station Saturday from the centerline camera in Atlantis' docking module as the shuttle is maneuvered into position for docking with the station. Atlantis and her seven-person international crew will be docked with the station for several days of re-supply, servicing and raising the altitude of the station.

— AFP photo

US shuttle docks with International Space Station

HOUSTON, Texas, May 21: The US space shuttle Atlantis linked up with the International Space Station (ISS) early Sunday, as it prepared to deliver much needed supplies and begin vital repairs on the giant space platform, reports AFP.

"Houston we have capture," astronaut James Halsell was heard to say after Atlantis' middle-of-the-night docking with the ISS.

Construction on the space station is expected to take five more years.

Its seven-member shuttle crew will begin preparing the two modules of the ISS already in orbit for the arrival of the Russian service module Zvezda scheduled for July.

Atlantis was launched Friday from the Kennedy Space Center on a delayed, 10-day mission to perform maintenance on the station, and to load onto the station equipment and supplies for use by crews arriving later this year.